

Developments: Combatting scepticism towards science

According to the Verband österreichischer Volkshochschulen (VV) and the ARGE Bildungshuser österreich (ARGE), the situation of adult learning and education (ALE) in Austria has slightly improved. The ALE sector itself is very active, but in general, ALE is still seen as being of minor importance compared to regular education.

Policy developments

Last year, several new policies were introduced in Austria.

The Adult Education Portal of the Ministry of Education promotes critical media competence, which is primarily intended to address programme planners, but also teachers. The Minister of Education wants to combat the prevalent strong scepticism towards science. According to VV, successful cooperation programmes with universities have existed in adult education for many years.

The agreement between the federal government and the provinces under Article 15a of the Federal Constitutional Law was extended until the end of 2023, meaning the funding of educational measures in the area of basic education and completing compulsory schooling will be continued.

Moreover, the performance contracts of the non-profit federal associations of adult education and the Ministry of Education (BMBWF) have been finalised. They are aligned with the new European agenda for adult education and are based on four education policy goals of the BMBWF:

- upskilling and reskilling

- digitalisation
- participation and inclusion
- sustainability.

Adult education qualifications were strengthened

In 2021-2022, the diploma of the Academy of Continuing Education Austria (Weiterbildungsakademie sterreich - wba), which validates the qualifications of adult educators, was classified at level 6 in the National Qualifications Framework. This means that in addition to the certificate, which is already assigned to level 5, both qualifications are represented in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

Against the background of the shortage of skilled workers, higher vocational education (Hhere berufliche Bildung) is gaining importance. The government programme provides for the creation of a legal basis for this.

With the establishment of a BA Professional and an MA Professional programmes, initial measures have already been implemented within higher education. This is intended to improve the permeability between Vocational education and training (VET) and tertiary education. VET is seen - in the spirit of the Osnabrck Declaration 2020 - as an engine for reconstruction and a just transition to a digital and ecological economy.

A long-term development concerns the situation that some central fields of work of ALE are not within the scope of the national education department. This concerns, for example, integration courses or educational measures in connection with digitalisation. This development is not always positive from ALE's point of view.

Advocacy

EAEAs members were able to participate in public or direct consultations.

A consultation was also held on the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) of the European Union. The Conference of Adult Education (KEB), the working platform of the federal associations of non-profit adult education, and the VV submitted a statement on it. Furthermore, a statement was made on the consultation process of the European Commission Green Paper on Ageing.

Country reports by the European Commission

According to the EAEA members, the Country Reports reflect the situation in Austria well or to some extent. According to VV, the country reports and country-specific recommendations only deal with adult education very generally and minimally. The argument goes that it would be important to cover adult education specifically. ALE programmes are addressing the issues mentioned in the recommendations.

Financing of ALE

ALE is financed in different ways in Austria, varying from project and programme funding to fees paid by individuals. Federal funding for non-profit federal associations of adult education has been increased by five per cent for 2022. In the future, a special focus will be on combating hostility to democracy and scepticism about science.

Moreover, the NPO hardship fund has been extended and until May 2022, adult education organisations affected by the pandemic can submit for grants for 2021. Educational institutions that have an AT certificate and offer digital competence building are eligible for "digital skills vouchers" funding. This funding is awarded by the Federal Ministry for Digitalisation and Economic Location (BMDW) for the professional development of SMEs in the area of digital skills.

Learners voice in ALE

The voice of learners in Austria is represented by adult education associations, based on their experience of the learning needs of their target groups. However, the legislation does not currently require the inclusion of learners voices in decision-making, and the learners voice is not mentioned in the ALE legislation.

CONFINTEA VII

In Austria, the ALE associations were not actively trying to get involved in CONFINTEA VII, the global adult education conference organised by UNESCO. Thus, the national preparation process and the conference itself was not very visible in civil society.

Challenges and future plans: Promoting sustainability

The VW mentions that Austria faces a serious shortage of qualified teachers, as many long-standing course instructors have stopped teaching over the course of the pandemic. It is therefore a challenge to find newly qualified teachers. Furthermore, it will be important to recall participants and attract new participants to adult education.

COVID 19: Participation figures have fallen sharply

The current situation of adult education is still marked by the Corona pandemic. Participation figures have fallen sharply, and general adult education has been hit particularly hard.

While vocational adult education lost about 23% of its participants during the pandemic, general adult education lost around 62%. Currently, there are already signs of a slight recovery, with participation figures growing again by about 10% in both areas. This is shown by [statistics of the Conference of Adult Education Austria](#)

The VV also reports that, due to the good equipment of the IEB programme, the basic skills' education continued success in the digital environment during the pandemic.

Future plans

ARGE continues to participate in two international Erasmus + projects.

A number of press activities have been implemented to draw attention to the achievements of adult education and advocate for more funding. A film with VV President Heinz Fischer, a relaunch of the VV website and the development of a VV advocacy programme is also planned.

- <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000132202755/was-man-gegen-niedrige-formalabschluesse-tun-kann>
- <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000133181232/leseschwaeche-geht-durch-alle-schichten-und-es-gibt-angebote-fuer>
- <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000134729978/wissenschaftsbildung-und-was-ist-mit-den-erwachsenen>
<https://www.wienerzeitung.at/meinung/gastkommentare/2154535-Ein-Aufschrei-aus-der-Erwachsenenbildung.html>
- <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/meinung/leserforum/2156679-Leserforum.html>

Sustainability

The VV is currently developing a strategy to promote sustainability in their work procedures. The topic of sustainability and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is addressed in the VV committees and in a separate Austrian working group. In addition, practical experiences are exchanged and adult education centres and regional associations make their offerings available for transfer.

Moreover, the creation of Austria-wide offers in the field of sustainability and SDGs are planned. Cooperation with Birdlife Austria is developed, whereby courses are offered throughout Austria. Within the framework of the Austrian UNESCO Commission, there is the Advisory Board on Transformative Education, which deals with the implementation of the SDGs in Austria.

ARGE reports that sustainability is omnipresent in their activities, even without a special strategy. ARGEs members provide education offers relating to sustainability and are keen on using resources sustainably. ARGE also promotes sustainability through specific classes on green skills.

Recommendations to policymakers

ARGE states that there should be a closer relationship between all organisations which are part of KEB (Conference of Austrian Adult Education). Moreover, the Campaigning for ALE should increase, and active citizenship should be promoted.

VV emphasises that:

- ALE should be recognised as an equal part of the education system through contemporary adult education law.
- One percent of the federal education budget should be available for adult education

- There is a need for structural funding and long-term education programmes instead of project funding
 - Low-threshold, democratic and scientific education as well as diversity and sustainability are to be established as basic principles of adult education and its funding.
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